

**UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS LOWELL
CENTER FOR LOWELL HISTORY
ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION**

**LOWELL NATIONAL HISTORICAL PARK
UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS LOWELL**

**ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF LOWELL, MA:
MAKING, REMAKING, AND REMAKING AGAIN**

INFORMANT: THONG PHAMDUY [VIETNAM]

INTERVIEWER: CHRISTOPH STROBEL

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C = CHRISTOPH

T = THONG

Tape 08.34

C: If you could please identify yourself, say where you live in Lowell, your ethnic background.

T: My name is Thong Phamduy. I live in the Lower Highlands... probably about twenty years there now. Previous to that I lived in South Lowell... for about five years there, so a total of twenty- five years in this community.

C: You came here from Vietnam...can you talk a little bit about that if you don't mind?

T: Like most of the Vietnamese who got out of the country between '75 to, I would say '90, or even you know, later than that, those people got out by boat. They're called "Boat People." I'm probably in the first wave, the first five years after the collapse of Saigon happened.... That's the big wave of people get out by boat. Usually we landed in another country nearby Vietnam, in my case Indonesia. Other people landed in the Philippines or Malaysia. So we basically waited there and hoped that another country would accept us as refugees. In my case the U.S. picked me up.

C: How long did you stay in the refugee camps?

T: Probably about six months.

C: That was relatively fast then.

T: Very short... during the first wave... because you're talking about 50,000 people in the camp. So it was a big wave. We could relatively easily leave for a third country.

C: What motivated you to leave Vietnam?

T: Like everybody during that time you know, no matter what, we had to get out.... Communists took over. My family, we had ties with the old government... my father was working for the police force a high ranking officer. So we had a difficult time. He was jailed. So that's the main reason. We couldn't live there... it was just too difficult.

C: Did you leave with your entire family, or did you guys have to split up?

T: For most of the boat people it was very difficult to get the whole family out.... Luckily I brought with me three other sisters. I'm the oldest one in the family of eight.

C: There are a lot of horrible stories about the experience of the boat people... pirates and bad weather...?

T: Our trip was so lucky. We spend about four days, four nights at sea until we landed... a very smooth trip.

C: Were the conditions on the boat really crowded?

T: Very crowded. You know, just imagine a thirty foot boat fit a hundred and five people.

C: One hundred and five on a thirty foot-long boat, wow!

T: How did we all fit in there... I don't know?

C: Was it, was it scary?

T: We decided, to either get out of the country or die. There was no other choice... but people were scared.

C: But no pirates, and good weather. Good, very good.... Was Lowell the first city you arrived at in the United States?

T: No, I ended up in Salem, Massachusetts. That was my first place. We got there in 1980.

C: What made you decide to come to Lowell?

T: I got accepted at U Lowell as a college student. So I was starting over here and I brought everybody with me.

C: What subject did you study?

T: Mechanical engineering.

C: Is that the field you work in now?

T: No. I changed to education.

C: So you're teaching...?

T: High school.

C: High School, and that's in Malden?

T: In Malden.

C: Excellent. Do you like that job?

T: A matter of fact I love to teach. When I came to this country, unfortunately, I couldn't pursue that, because my English back then was just terrible. So the only choice I had was to go to engineering, where there was less reading and writing. So I could survive. After I finished my Bachelor I think in '85, I continued... in Grad School. I got accepted at MIT. I went there for three years... three and a half years, and you know, and between the Masters and the PhD.... I got married and there were other things.

C: Life happens, yes.

T: Yes. So I got my Masters Degree, and I got out. At the time my English had improved and I decided to change my career.

C: And then you went into education. And you worked in Malden the whole time or?

T: Yes, for twenty-one years. Ten years teaching... and I'm an administrator now. I'm a District Director of Technology.

C: So you do a lot of teacher training and technology acquisitions, and those sorts of things?

T: Everything. In the School Department in Malden... it started with a small department, basically support. Then we expanded the whole technology support, IT Department, database, and all of that. And now we also oversee the Parent Information Center. So that's a part of the service I'm doing. Registration for new students, make sure the data and everything is going smoothly....

C: How big is Malden as a school district?

T: Just a medium urban school district, 6,000 students.

C: What was your first impression when you came to the United States?

T: Just really blessed.

C: Was the fact that there is a fairly sizeable Southeast Asian Community in Lowell... did that attract you to the city, or was it really just school?

T: It was just a matter of coincidence. I was accepted at UMass Lowell after one year of community college.... And that brought me to Lowell. And when I came to Lowell I saw during my time here that the cost of living seemed fairly affordable.... I worked through college.... Summertime I worked a lot of jobs... and I was able to save and to purchase a home back then to share with my brother and sister. So that's one of the big reasons why I continued to stay. But there's another reason. Some people tend to move out of Lowell when they settle, or when they start to make their career. I do not like that. I wanted to stay in Lowell and continue to work, invest in the city.... I did a lot of work around here.

C: Are you active in the Vietnamese Community?

T: I'm very active. We are a small community. We are not large like the Cambodians. If you are talking about Asians, yes, there's a big Asian Community in Lowell. But when you start to break it down you will find that 80-90% are Cambodians... and then you got the Laotian and Vietnamese. So I think we got a few thousand Vietnamese.... I am very involved with the community. When I was a student at UMass... I also set up... the Vietnamese Student Club or Association. And then from that time we extended to organize the celebration.

C: Which celebration are you referring to?

T: The New Years Celebration.... So when I became the president of Vietnamese Student Association, I started to get the community involved, to get everyone to come and celebrate. We were using Cumnock Hall. And that event continues until now. We also organized the Vietnamese Catholic Group – about twenty people when we started out.

C: Which church is that?

T: Saint Patrick's.

C: Saint Patrick's. And you guys meet in the basement?

T: Correct. That has become a magnet to Vietnamese for all kinds of activities.

C: People that show up for that they are not necessarily Catholic?

T: No it's not necessary to be Catholic.

C: Do you go to Vietnamese stores or restaurants for food?

T: I don't think there is any Vietnamese market here. But we do have numerous Vietnamese Restaurants around. They are all great. My family actually started a restaurant here, the first one in Lowell.

C: Which one is that?

T: Now it changed name. It was Viet Thai Palace on Drum Hill. We started that restaurant, and we operated it for three years. We were bad in business. So it did not last. We transferred it to other people and they continued. And actually it is run by a friend of mine.

C: Is it Pho 88 now?

T: Pho 88!

C: I've eaten there a couple of time. It is very good.

C: Do you have children?

T: Oh yes, five.

C: Do you still have relatives back in Vietnam?

T: I told you that I brought three sisters. Then two more from my family joined us a year later. Then finally we reunited. Probably about six years later the other two got out, also by boat. All eight of us got out. My parents remained there. When I became a citizen I sponsored my parents. That's still ten, fifteen years ago when my parents came over, which is not too bad. We reunited the whole family, except cousins of course. They're still there, but other than that everybody is here.

C: Are you still in touch with your cousins at all, or not so much?

T: Not too much, once in a while....

C: Is most of your extended family still living in Lowell, or have your siblings moved to other places.

T: We love to be near each other so we can support each other. We make our decisions together. Stick together in Lowell unless... you couldn't find a job around here, then you got to move.... There's only two that moved out to California because of jobs. But the rest is still in Lowell.

C: Wow that is great.

T: We still get together every weekend. And then it all centers around community work. New Years... Saint Patrick's as a focus point. I started a Vietnamese Language Program eleven years ago. Now that program seems to meet the need of a lot of Vietnamese people. We have about 100 students in the program and ten teachers. We run thirty weeks per year starting in September. Like the school year. The students usually stay in our program between eight and ten years.

C: Oh very good.

T: So it's a little bit at a time... but we show results.

C: Very good. Obviously it's very important for the community in general, but I imagine too for your children to learn Vietnamese.

T: That was the drive to create that program. Because in my own family we have twenty some kids.

C: So you're basically trying to maintain and pass on Vietnamese culture to your kids through language... through celebrations like the New Year.... Are there other things you do to maintain a little bit of a Vietnamese cultural identity?

T: For my family we're just using the food and the family weekend gatherings. We always eat Vietnamese food on the weekend. So it continues. We go to Vietnamese restaurant.

C: Do you speak English with your children, or?

T: Both.

C: How good are your kids with their Vietnamese?

T: Pretty good. The goal of the Vietnamese Family Program is for the youth to become instructors for the next generation, so that we are able to carry on that mission. So as soon as they finish the program after eight years, usually eight years, they're invited to become a teaching assistant for two years or three years. Then they become instructors. Usually they instruct the lower classes. The elder like myself, we cover the upper classes including the culture, poetry, and everything else.

C: That's pretty rigorous.

T: Since I'm a teacher I know how to create curriculum. I am able to work with the group and create our own curriculum. We are revising it every year it is a working model.

C: No, this is very fascinating.... Did you talk to other Vietnamese about that as sort of a model...or even other immigrants?

T: I tried to bring that model to some other communities for consideration.... How do you make the program sustainable in this society? We try to preserve the language, but how do you do that? Of course, before I created this program I had to do some research about other programs. I learned from those models....

C: It's very fascinating. Does your wife work too, or...?

T: Not with the five kids.... We both were students. I met her at UMass Lowell. I was a senior, she was a freshman. Then I went on to grad school. And then later on, we married, we've had children. So she quit in the middle to take care of the kids. She's a wonderful woman. After ten years out of school, she applied and she finished her Masters Degree... about two years ago. After that she and I created a company... we write web applications for education.

C: Oh wow, so you're a teacher... creator of a company, and then family, father of five, and you're a weekend teacher of Vietnamese.

T: Oh, that's just one small piece.

C: How much do you sleep?

T: Like you. [Both laugh] I love community work.... Saint Patrick is one of the things I really enjoy.... Not only for Vietnamese, but in general... it is a multi-ethnic parish.

C: There is often talk in immigrant communities about intergenerational conflict... differences in values. Can you talk about that...?

T: You find that often. However it depends on how you resolve that. Communication is a key thing. That's what we try to do in our community, and of course in my family. We try to have the youth to take the lead in the community, which is very different than traditional Vietnamese culture.

C: Are you registered to vote?

T: Yes.

C: Do you vote?

T: Yes, because you know, it's very serious....

C: We're doing the study for the Lowell National Historic Park. Have you been to their museums?

T: Some years ago. Not recently though. I'd say probably five years ago. I went for my [school] district to go to the Tsongas Center, and had a full week of training on designing

the curriculum for the middle school through the water wheel and the history of textile production.... We had opportunity to visit the National Park also.

C: Do you feel that a lot of the people in the Vietnamese community go to the Park, or are they in any way or shape connected to the Park?

T: I don't think that would be the case.... I was lucky to know. If I have friends that come here I take them to the historic places.... But other people...they might not think that Lowell has such wonderful things around us.

C: What do you think the Park could do to get more Vietnamese to come down there, to be involved? What could they do maybe in terms of recruitment? Recruitment is the wrong word, but advertising, etc.?

T: I know that they did a wonderful job offering tours for free on certain days, but I'm not sure that information gets to the community. I'm on a mailing list so I go to those, but I'm not sure other people get the same thing....

C: If there would be a Vietnamese New Year Celebration, would you think that might draw people?

T: If the National Park can participate in any fashion that would be a good way for the National Park to advertise. And I think you know, in the past we had in contacts with Ali. He used to come to the Vietnamese New Year. And through that I know about the Mogan Center.

C: And that's really the only contact you have? Well thank you so much for taking the time to talk with us. This was very insightful.

T: Good. I hope that provided you with all the information. If you have any questions later, I want to give you my email.